



FOCUS VERSE

Matthew 5:48

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

LESSON TEXT

Matthew 5:38–48

38 Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:

39 But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.

40 And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.

41 And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.

42 Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.

43 Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.

44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

45 That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

46 For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?

47 And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?

48 Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.



FOCUS THOUGHT

Jesus calls us to live unselfishly and to forsake our desire for revenge.



The Unintended Product of Revenge

Mark Twain is noted as having once said, “Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured.” Certainly the same could be said about harboring other harmful emotions and attitudes such as bitterness and jealousy, which sometimes result in vengeful actions.

In her article “Why Getting Revenge Isn’t Worth It,” Jen Kim summarized the findings of social psychologist Kevin Carlsmith when she wrote, “The reason for revenge is to achieve catharsis. However, his recent study suggests that revenge is, in fact, counterproductive to achieving that goal. The study explains that those who seek to punish

continue to think about the perpetrator, keeping the pain and the anger very much alive” (www.psychologytoday.com, accessed August 18, 2015).

Those who choose to exercise revenge only keep their own hurt and anger alive, allowing the negative emotions to continue to torment them and foment bitterness. Rather than seeking revenge against those who hurt and use us, Jesus taught us to love our enemies and do good to them who “despitefully use” us (Matthew 5:44). Abandoning the perceived need to seek revenge in order to live life unselfishly engenders the most peaceful and positively vibrant life one can enjoy on earth.

OUTLINE

I. OLD COVENANT TRADITIONS

- A. An Eye for an Eye; a Tooth for a Tooth
- B. Love Your Neighbor; Hate Your Enemy

II. IDENTIFYING THE HUMAN BONDAGES

- A. Desire for Revenge
- B. My Four and No More

III. THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVES

- A. Do Double Good for Each Evil Offense
- B. Love Everyone Equally as the Heavenly Father Does

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The Sermon on the Mount provides a wonderful exploration of Jesus’ agenda for the coming kingdom of Heaven. This much anticipated Kingdom began with the arrival of its King. Jesus’ first sermons were about repenting from the old ways in preparation for new Kingdom living.

Even today we find ourselves looking for the Kingdom’s consummation with Jesus’ second coming rather than how we are to live now. The disciples had a similar challenge. (See Matthew 24; Acts 1:4–8). Jesus was not only concerned about adultery, murder, and deceit. He addressed self-centeredness with its orientation on rights and vengeance as well as selective understanding of God’s directive to love one’s neighbor.

Jesus’ radical claims on Kingdom citizens are no less startling than Isaiah’s glimpse of the time when wolves and lambs would live in harmony. The lion will change its nature to consume straw like an ox rather than eating its neighbor (Isaiah 11:6–7). Kingdom citizens will undergo radical change as they follow their King. Transformed citizens will advance the King’s initiatives by serving as witnesses to their world.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. OLD COVENANT TRADITIONS

The God who made the covenant at Mount Sinai was made flesh in Jesus Christ. God’s

purposes have always been the same: He desires to live among His people. Prior to Adam and Eve's fall, no barrier existed for this initiative. With sin, however, God's holiness served as a threat to the very people He wanted to inhabit. With Abraham and his descendants, God took the initiative to create a way for the people to be holy.

The covenant set parameters of this holy arrangement. Mount Sinai's temporary solution pointed the way to the ultimate solution, but it was unable to change the nature of fallen humanity. Israel failed to live within the established boundaries. The old covenant was not the problem; human traditions turned righteousness into unrighteousness yet again.

A. An Eye for an Eye; a Tooth for a Tooth

The Mount Sinai covenant included holiness parameters in both vertical and horizontal directions. In the Ten Commandments, four commandments directly related to God, and the other six regulated relationships between the people of God. Of course violating the horizontal codes was just as damning as disregard for the vertical codes. In fact David felt that his violation of commandments seven (adultery) and six (murder) were actually sins against God (Psalm 51:4).

Jesus' critique of human traditions that had been added to God's loving commandments must be understood against the context of what God intended by the commandments in the first place. Once we understand God's intent, we can explore human abuses of God's gifts.

The Mount Sinai covenant directed human behavior toward righteousness in several ways. Prior to the eye-for-an-eye code, humans tended toward escalating retaliation. We can see an example of retaliation in the sin of Jacob's sons against Shechem for the mistreatment of their sister Dinah. Their bloody plan went far beyond an attack on Shechem and his family's honor to complete annihilation of all the men and stealing all the city's wealth. Sadly they even used God's covenant circumcision sign to destroy their enemy. What God meant for righteousness they used for radical evil.

The Mount Sinai covenant replaced escalating retaliation with a higher principle of justice. We must also remember the covenant provided the means for whole community holiness. To let sin go unchecked called into question the holiness of the whole people of God. (See Leviticus 24:15; John Nolland: *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew*).

The eye-for-an-eye rule also protected the weak. Even slaves found some redress under the law that made sure the strong would be punished for such egregious behavior. Sin would not, could not, go unpunished in God's covenant community. On the other side of the equation, the stronger or violent members of the community were put on notice. They were not going to escape judgment and punishment for their evil behavior just because they had power.

Finally, this law placed judgment and sentence in the hands of a judge rather than in a family's personal desire to get even or to remove shame. As with much of the world today, shame to one family member brought shame to the whole family. For the Mount Sinai covenant, however, the primary concern was holiness. Israel had to advocate for the weak by punishing the evildoer, or she could not hope to retain God's presence.

B. Love Your Neighbor; Hate Your Enemy

The covenant's call for neighborly love is rooted in God's nature, and as such, it is not subject to change. When God invites a people to be in relationship with Him, they must respond to the love command. To the modern Western mind, placing love and command together seems to be a paradox. Love is viewed as an emotional feeling beyond individual control.

Sadly, human emotions are fallen. To accept the invitation to a covenant relationship with God, humans must surrender emotions and related behaviors to the Master. The command to love one's neighbor is inseparable from the first command to love the Lord with all of one's heart, soul, mind, and strength (Luke 10:26–37). God called Israel to lay down affinity to all other gods and to pick up the challenge to love their neighbors.

The Mount Sinai covenant included many elements related to the love command. When the Israelites settled as an agrarian society in the Promised Land, they were to care for others by not completely harvesting fields or olive trees. They were to care for strangers among them because they had been slaves and strangers in Egypt before God called them out. For example, those who had become slaves because of suffering economic reversals were freed from slavery after seven years and could even resettle in ancestral lands during the year of jubilee. The covenant people could lavishly care for others because God lavishly cared for them! The poor people among them had the ear of God in a special way.

Unfortunately God's gracious gifts can be turned upside down by those who only nominally act like God's people. Some people try to limit God's care for others rather than responding to the love command. When Jesus highlighted the directive to "hate your enemies," He was drawing from their tradition rather than the Mount Sinai covenant. God wanted to bless Israel so the world would know He was the only true God. God wanted a highway for those who were once Israel's enemies but would become co-worshippers (Isaiah 19:21–25).

Loving one's enemies was maintained at the individual level of a few covenant people. For example, an unnamed maiden knew God's global mission included even enemy captors who may have killed many in her family and village. She suggested that the general, Naaman, could find healing for his leprosy in Israel (II Kings 5:3). Elisha was content to find deliverance when God put the enemy army in his hand. Rather than executing the soldiers or holding them hostage for a large bag of gold, he fed them and sent them home in accordance with the laws of hospitality rather than the laws of war (II Kings 6:18–23).

Most of Israel assumed neighbors meant only family and near kin. In their sinful logic they reasoned God's command to love one's neighbor must include a corollary to hate one's enemy. In doing so their birthright of loving grace became an agency of hatred and death.

II. IDENTIFYING THE HUMAN BONDAGES

The cruelest bonds are not those of debtor's prison or even human slavery. The bonds of sin carry the penalty of pain and inevitable death. These bonds cannot be shed by the use of a wealthy person's checkbook or a magician's slight-of-hand trick. Humanity cannot be redeemed by anything corruptible (I Peter 1:18).

A. Desire for Revenge

God's law of an eye for an eye provided a redemptive lift that brought equality before magistrates in place of escalating vengeance available to the strong. This justice element of the law contributed to the holy conditions where God could abide with them. As Paul noted, however, the law did a wonderful job of pointing out the mountain of sin rather than transforming people into God's image. (See Romans 7:7.) Sinful human nature changed a law of equalizing justice into an evil-seeking revenge and celebration of personal rights above God's invitation to holiness.

The first step away from righteous implementation of this law is the shift away from focus on community holiness to individual redress for crimes. While holy and correct implementation would have brought redress for crimes, both judgment of the perpetrator and vindication for the suffering victim, a focus on redress would not bring holiness. The central driving force shifted from obeying God's will for blessing humanity to making the individual's satisfaction premier. Satisfaction for self paradoxically pushed humanity back toward retaliation rather than engaging a loving God.

The second, and perhaps more destructive, step away from God's law is the elevation of personal rights above all else. To abandon God's holiness for one's independence drives human beings apart from each other and from their Creator. For the person who has walked away from God, the only recourse for real or perceived wrong is to stick up for oneself.

B. My Four and No More

Sinful celebration of the self further leads to tribalism or gang-like behavior where

outsiders are persecuted. Perhaps the saddest part of Jesus' teaching at this point is the fact He was speaking to a people who claimed to be religiously superior to all others. However, religion can be used as a tool for hatred, self-justification, and even abuse of outsider groups rather than God's intent to care for those in need and to be untainted by sin (James 1:27).

Jesus' ministry and words confronted the elevation of self over others for the sin it was. Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees they were worse than the sinners they criticized. He went so far as to say they should stop evangelizing because they were making their converts twice the children of Hell that they were (Matthew 23:15).

A focus on self and clan leads to an emphasis on limited resources rather than God's abundant blessings. Israel preferred this sinful orientation to God's preference where He owned the land and all resources. What a trade off! God's limitless gifts were traded down to limited resources. Such a position dedicates a portion of the limited wealth to defend one's right to exclude others. Sin reigns.

III. THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVES

After providing His grace-filled Mount Sinai covenant, God's next step was to be born as a human being and "live grace" among humanity. Jesus' birth and ministry inaugurated a new Kingdom where humans could live according to divine purposes.

Transforming initiatives would not be another list of dos and don'ts. Kingdom living called for a more organic transformation. Paul said we become new creations (II Corinthians 5:17). Kingdom living is far more than a metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly. Butterflies still carry caterpillar DNA, and they give birth to caterpillars.

Conversely Kingdom inhabitants take on new attributes as they become new creatures. They become the Father's children (Matthew 5:45). Jesus showed the way as the firstborn of the Father; His kingdom followers would take on this new nature and become joint heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). Following Jesus will not be fulfilled by a new set of rules. Jesus' teaching becomes

realized in us as our nature is changed. Kingdom citizens evaluate themselves against these Father-like behaviors.

A. Do Double Good for Each Evil Offense

Fallen human nature largely focuses its energy on self-preservation. Many psychologists doubt that a person can commit a truly altruistic act. They argue that humans will always have a personal agenda even when they think they are acting unselfishly on behalf of another person.

Kingdom living is a whole different economy. Resources are limitless. All people are of equal value, even if they are unable to contribute tangible benefits at all. Shame is banished by the King, so individuals do not have to waste energy protecting their honor. Love and respect are multiplied by giving them away rather than by defending oneself. Finally, the only one who has to worry about judging performance is the King (I Corinthians 4:1-4); He is also the only One who is authorized to execute judgment's penalty.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave four categories of change required in His kingdom. These changes relate to threats to one's person, possessions, liberty, and wealth.

"But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:39).

Threats to personal honor. At first glance Jesus' directive seems to be passive resistance or even ignoring evil in the world. Nothing could be further from the truth! In Jesus' own trial, when the high priest's servant smote Him, He did not sit idly by and let violence go unnoticed or be celebrated. Instead He challenged the miscarriage of justice. (See John 18:22-23.)

Rather than seeing Jesus' terse statement as law telling His followers what to do in this very specific case, we must dig a little deeper to see how this behavior assists us in being "the children of your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:45). Kingdom citizens realize the threat is not against them personally but

against righteousness as a whole. They are able to give up the responsibility of getting even because they have complete confidence the King will punish all evil (Hebrews 10:30–31).

We should also explore the meaning of smiting the right cheek. A right-handed attacker would need to backhand another person to effect a right-cheek attack. The force of the hit in this case is more an insult than an effort to do major bodily harm. Jesus called His followers not to focus on their own self-interests because their heavenly Father had already demonstrated their value! By giving up defense of their own value they (1) receive the Father's value assessment, (2) devote their energy and affections to living in the Father's plan, (3) value even the most wicked person as a potential new Kingdom citizen, and (4) confront the deeper sources of evil not made of flesh and blood.

Threats to personal possessions. The second transformation is related to personal possessions. Every culture has its own understanding of private property. Native American cultures, for example, did not think of land as something that could be privately owned; land was a shared resource.

"And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also" (Matthew 5:40).

Regardless of the new Kingdom citizen's original culture, the new culture will bring change. Jewish law required returning a person's outer garment by the day's end since the garment had more than one purpose. The outer garment was also frequently used for a night covering or even a bag for carrying grain or other objects. Rarely would a person own two of them.

Just as with personal concerns, property defense is primarily left to the King. We are called, however, to count our treasures in Heaven more than on Earth. Kingdom citizens do not live for costly raiment or fine foods. In a world where identity is tied to possessions, we do well to seriously consider Jesus' call to "seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33) and let the King worry about our possessions. If we are

worried about losing our possessions, then we are not Kingdom focused.

Threats to liberty. New Kingdom dwellers are freed from sin's bondage to follow their King's directives. Though the transforming initiative in this case is largely irrelevant for us, the underlying change in Kingdom citizens is still very much in effect.

"And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain" (Matthew 5:41).

In the Roman world, a soldier had the right to conscript subject people to carry his luggage for a mile. Since the people looked forward to liberation from Rome's yoke, every step of conscripted compliance would be taken with bitterness and anger.

But Jesus called His followers to accept the conscription and even go an extra mile. Imagine the shock on a soldier's face when he saw a new Kingdom citizen pick up the burden and volunteer to go even further. John Nollord suggested that following Jesus' direction would change the disciple from a bitter laborer to a joy-filled servant. This radical reorientation would free the disciple to serve and care for others without a feeling of loss to self.

Threats to wealth. Kingdom living is transformed by living in the reality of sufficient resources. While the Law mandated care for the poor as noted above, the new Kingdom would transform people to the place where they lived what they believed.

"Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away" (Matthew 5:42).

Some Kingdom citizens are specifically gifted with liberality. (See Romans 12:8.) The King gives them resources or means to gain resources along with the wisdom in distributing this surplus wealth. They give with joy. The King chooses this means of caring for all His people, both the givers and receivers, as a better way than meeting every need directly. These specially gifted citizens will provide examples for all of us to follow even if we have more limited means.

Perhaps caring for the poor requires different forms of creativity in our modern world. Some who beg and borrow from us may also need life skills or help setting up small businesses. Some may need advocacy help to have access to jobs or other means of both providing for their own families and providing resources for others. Some may need help and encouragement in accessing education and other forms of training.

B. Love Everyone Equally as the Heavenly Father Does

We see models of God's love around us. Those people give us examples to follow, encouragement when loving is difficult, and hope that we can do some good in our world. As wonderful as our fellow citizens are from time to time, our ultimate example and standard is our heavenly Father.

"That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45).

Fortunately for atheists and idolaters, our Father loves them and blesses them with many natural blessings. He calls us to follow His example in using the resources He has given us to care for our neighbors, even our enemies. Sadly, some Christians have claimed this ideal will have to wait until the Kingdom is complete. Jesus' teaching requires serious transformation if we hope to live in the new Kingdom. Our repentance must be followed by action.

Love the enemy. Perhaps this command is one of the most challenging. This kind of love requires both emotional reorientation and practical action. Kingdom citizens are called to see two kinds of people: those already in the Kingdom and those who are potential new Kingdom members. Kingdom love serves as a witness to our discipleship (John 13:35). Such love is difficult to counterfeit!

Jesus gave some ways to put this love into action. He calls us to bless those who curse us. Just as soldiers got the extra mile with a smile, and plaintiffs got cloak and tunic, cursers get blessings. This kind of blessing

requires spiritual insight into the deeper need of cursers. What are some possible causes of their anger? As James said, this kind of blessing is not fulfilled with words alone. Actual food and shelter is far better than a simple, "God bless you." (See James 2:15–17.) Kingdom citizens will care for both the victims of cursing and the cursers, even when the curses are written on a bomb or biological weapon.

Such active blessing needs to be accompanied with prayer for the enemy. The old human response would focus on deliverance. This blessing is activated with intercessory prayer for the enemies, their families, and their cities. Prayers will include peace for them—peace from war with humanity as well as peace with their estranged heavenly Father.

Salute the enemy. According to the *KJV Dictionary*, the word *salute* means "to greet; to address with expressions of kind wishes."

"And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?" (Matthew 5:47).

Jesus called His followers to be genuinely oriented toward seeking the best for their enemies.

As the Kingdom spread, each citizen would view new acquaintances, nice ones and mean ones, as potential new brothers and sisters. To wish the best for them would include the normal rain and sun in their seasons as well as protection from disasters. Such a desire would genuinely seek the best for the other, a best that would include physical and spiritual blessings that can come only with being reconciled to the Father. In fact, Kingdom citizens live out their days as agents of reconciliation (II Corinthians 5:18–20).

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

New Kingdom citizens are blessed when they realize their new status calls them to live out their King's words in all areas of life. Conversely, they will fail to reach their potential if they try to follow His words as just a new set of laws to be fulfilled. We need to be born again as new citizens with changed hearts.

While we will follow the particulars of the Sermon on the Mount, it is more fully grasped as we live out new behaviors in all areas of our lives. Families, friends, congregations, and even national organizations will have to consider how they live out transforming initiatives because God sees us not only as individuals but also as a whole people.

Living in Kingdom faithfulness will require God's grace just as did initiation into the Kingdom by new birth. All of Jesus' followers should be aware of areas where God's grace needs to be at work. For example, pain and shame from the past may hinder

an appropriate response to aggressors, enemies, and people who are different from us. But God's grace can heal the pain and the shame. The person who has been healed can then use the experience to help others who have suffered.

Grace must also be at work in areas where the new Kingdom is radically different from the old. Some will have difficulty letting go of rights-based individualism and competition as they follow new Kingdom principles. How blessed we are to receive the grace needed to grow as faithful Kingdom citizens! As God's people, we can grow in grace. ■

REFLECTIONS

- How did you respond the last time someone attacked you in a way that made you feel shame? How does the response measure up to Jesus' call to release the desire to retaliate or to defend your personal rights?
- Who are the enemies of the church today? How can individuals, families, friendship groups, and local congregations actively love those enemies in Jesus' name?
- Jesus calls His followers to seek blessings for everyone. After evaluating your encounters with non-Christians last week, consider ways the gospel calls you to repent. How can you change your prayers, actions, and emotions to be in line with the call to bless those you meet?
- Which attack (against person, possessions, liberty, or wealth) is most difficult for you to handle in a Kingdom way? What steps can you take to more faithfully live out Jesus' principles?
- What areas of your life need additional grace from God and the leading of His Spirit to live as a faithful Kingdom citizen and witness?